

## KACOU ANANZE, THE SPIDER IN BERNARD DADIÉ'S *THE BLACK CLOTH*: A VICTIM OF HIS OWN EGO

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### RESUME

Un conte est « une histoire, habituellement d'auteur anonyme et comportant des éléments légendaires et mythiques, conçue et léguée oralement aux nouvelles générations ». Le conte ainsi défini par Webster New World Dictionary, il implique que *Le Pagne noirde* Bernard Dadié, est une collection d'histoires orales venant précisément des peuples de la zone forestière de l'Afrique subsaharienne. Parmi les éléments légendaires de ce type de conte, figure le personnage de l'Araignée nommée KacouAnanzè reconnue pour son intelligence et sa ruse. Cet article se propose de présenter les traits distinctifs du personnage dans ses relations avec les autres personnages des contes le concernant et de montrer comment il est victime de son propre ego. Pour y parvenir, les approches de la psychanalyse et de l'analyse structurale seront utilisées selon le cas : la psychanalyse pour étudier la psychologie de KacouAnanzè ou de l'homme dans la société ; l'approche structurale parce qu'elle est nécessaire pour mettre en lumière la structure narrative récurrente qui conduit KacouAnanzè du succès à l'échec.

**MOTSCLE:** Contes, KacouAnanzè, Psychologie, Société, Structure Narrative

### ABSTRACT

A folktale is "a story, usually of anonymous authorship and legendary or mythical elements made and handed down orally among the common people."<sup>1</sup> The folktale defined in this way by Webster's New World Dictionary, it implies that Bernard Dadié's *The Black Cloth*<sup>2</sup> is a collection of stories coming from an oral society, precisely from the peoples of the forest zone of the Sub-Saharan Africa. Among the legendary elements of this kind of tale is the famous character of the spider named KacouAnanzè renowned for his intelligence and trickery. The purpose of this article is to present the distinctive features of the character in his relations with the other legendary characters in which he is involved and to show how he is a victim of his own ego. To reach this goal, the dual approach of psychoanalysis and structural analysis will be used whenever necessary: psychoanalysis is used as an approach to study KacouAnanzè's psychology or the one of man in the society. Structural analysis is necessary to point out the recurrent narrative structure which leads KacouAnanzè from success to failure.

**KEYWORDS:** Folktale, Kacouananzè, Psychology, Society, Narrative Structure

### INTRODUCTION

Every culture in this world has its own form of folktale. Webster's New World Dictionary defines it as a story, usually of anonymous authorship and legendary or mythical elements, made and handed down orally among the common people. Bernard Dadié's *The Black Cloth* is a collection of sixteen folktales among which KacouAnanzè, the Spider is

involved in nine. His presence in more than the half of the tales is an evidence of the importance the author gives to the character and of his fame in the oral society to which he belongs. The written form of folktales since the arrival of the white culture has given them the complexity of being both written and oral texts, produced in an African society which has its moral values. In that respect, Karen C. Hatch in her preface to the translation of *Le Pagne noir* into English, puts: “Today’s audience is much broader and certainly more widespread; it can enjoy the dual roles of listener and reader. Thus the text itself becomes as effective a teacher as the traditional story-teller”<sup>3</sup> In fact, in front of a folktale, the role of the reader is applicable to the written text; the one of the listener to the story telling.

A character in a folktale has roles to play as the one in a novel or a play. The difference is that a character in a folktale can be a personified animal belonging to the cultural environment which produces the tale, apart from human beings. Most of the characters in *The Black Cloth* are animals like the spider, the fish, the ox, the squirrel, the iguana, the tortoise, the pig, the boa, the cow, the bat. Throughout this study, KacouAnanzè is considered as a personified animal.

What are his distinctive features which make him so popular among the legendary characters in the geographical area of African Sub-Saharan forests? And how can he be taken as a victim of his own ego? These two questions will be dealt with from the two angles of psychoanalysis and structural analysis.

## **DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF KACOU ANANZE**

KacouAnanzè as well as the tales in which he appears belong to an African oral society whose people live by some social standards and moral values. Therefore, a tale cannot be studied in isolation but with the purpose of understanding what it reveals about that society. In the real life, the spider is a familiar animal that can be seen anywhere: in the house, room, kitchen, bathroom, backyard, trees, farm, bush and forests. Its intelligence is perhaps attributed to its ability to weave the web which serves as its house or as trap for catching some insects like flies, mosquitoes or ants. Its web is so fascinating that it inspires modern technology to give the acronym www., meaning “world wide web” to the worldwide network of communication. But what is the kind of KacouAnanzè’s intelligence in the African folktales?

The term intelligence doesn’t have a clear-cut definition because of its abstraction and its relativity. That is why *Webster’s New World Dictionary* considers many aspects in defining it: Being intelligent involves “*The ability to understand and learn from experience, the ability to respond quickly and successfully to a new situation, the faculty of reason in solving problems. Generally, any degree, of keenness, shrewdness*”<sup>4</sup> This definition implies that a person is intelligent at a certain degree. Nobody can be said to be unintelligent. Some people are just striving to be more intelligent than others. KacouAnanzè has always endeavoured to be more intelligent than the other legendary animals in Bernard Dadié’s folktales, thinking that the other creatures are stupid. To what extent does his intelligence fit in the characteristics of intelligence mentioned above?

KacouAnanzè has never understood or learnt from experience. He repeats the same kind of adventures and the same errors that lead to misfortune, since the causes of his previous errors are never taken into account. He only considers the advantages contained in those adventures. In “The spider and Tortoise”, he saves a squirrel’s life against promises of a world of abundance in the squirrel’s village. But he loses this happy life because of his own error. In spite of his separation from this world of happiness, he keeps on looking for the ways and means to catch another squirrel in the bush

so that he might reconquer his lost happy life.” *Ever since that morning, KacouAnanzè roams about the bush, night and day, going from leaf to leaf, branch to branch lying in ambush along the sides of the footpaths, he keeps on the watch for the squirrel’s passage*<sup>5</sup>In “The Mirror of Dearth”<sup>6</sup>, when the little fish he caught in the river begged him and lured him with promises to save his life, he yielded. Besides, he was forbidden to look in the mirror, but he did so and lost the happy life he was given. In “Spider’s Hump”<sup>7</sup>, he was warned not to imitate the dwarfs’ dance and song but he disobeyed and got a hump on his back. He falls twice in the same trap because he does not learn from experience.

However, he has the ability to respond quickly and successfully to a new situation. An intelligent person always finds the ways and means to reach his goals. KacouAnanzè shares in common with the hare another legendary character in the savannah area<sup>8</sup>, the motto that says “the end justifies the end”. KacouAnanzè’s readiness to respond quickly and successfully to a new situation is pointed out in the following way in the “Mirror of Dearth”:

We must get through our head once for all that one is not an idiot  
if he is called KacouAnanzè. If he allows himself certain boldness,  
it is because he always has more than one tricks in his head,  
more than one phrase on his tongue to help him out of a scrape.  
(...) He delights in difficult situations; he delights in obstacles  
that enhance his powers, unshackle his intelligence and spark  
ingenuity.”<sup>9</sup>

At a time during the dry season when famine was at its highest peak, KacouAnanzè became fisherman for his survival. He adapts himself to the demands of the situation: you find something to eat or you die.

Some other aspects of KacouAnanzè’s intelligence are his keenness of mind, his cleverness and his shrewdness. In any situation that is presented to him, he finds out a personal goal to achieve. In “Mother Iguana’s Funeral”<sup>10</sup>, when Iguana Son lost his mother, KacouAnanzè proposed a change of names before their departure for the funeral instead of sympathizing with his bereaved friend. By taking the nickname “Papa Stranger” and Iguana Son the one of “Papa Stay Put”, he is served all the meals and given respects that should go to Iguana Son. Instead of using his intelligence to comfort this friend he uses it to cheat him. In “The Yam Field”<sup>11</sup>, he simulates death because he wants to eat alone the yam in his field at the expense of his children and wife who worked with him on the farm.

KacouAnanzè’s intelligence is questionable. He takes profit of the moral weakness of his friend to build up a plan to usurp his rights. While he is expected to be a loving father to his wife and children, he plays tricks on them as he wants to eat alone the yam in his farm. He dies or precisely he plays the dead according to a supposed dream he had. In the dream, he should be buried with some cooking utensils in the yam field. To reach his goal, he uses an uncheckable device,

dream which nobody else can experience. His shrewdness shows that he is a stranger in his own family. Only matters his own happiness. To the happiness of his family or friends, he is indifferent. Otherwise, he does not use his intelligence to solve problems in his group. Instead, he uses it to create some others. He lacks the faculty of reason in solving problems. He simply takes his decisions regardless of others.

According to Mary Bronson Merki, there are six steps in decision making process: “1-staying the situation; 2-listing the options; 3-weighing the possible outcomes; 4-considering one’s values; 5-making a decision and act; 6-evaluating the decision.”<sup>12</sup> A look at these six steps shows that KacouAnanzè’s decisions are taken instinctively not by reason but always in his own interests. The six steps of decision making process are the ones of an intelligent person who wants to solve a problem in a group he belongs. But KacouAnanzè only solves problems for himself not for others. He does not state the situation to know why there is a decision to make or why he is in a given situation. He states the situation according to his own desires as when he decides to eat alone the yam in his field or when he suggests to change their names to prevent Iguana Son from receiving the meals at his mother’s funeral. Sometimes, he takes unnecessary risks which lead him into trouble. That is how he becomes hunchbacked after imitating the dance and the song of the dwarfs although he is forbidden to do so.

He always has one option, one way to deal with a situation, the one which he thinks, will lead him to his goal. That is why he does not weigh the possible outcomes. Whether the result is positive or negative does not matter. The only value he considers is his own, not the ones of his family, his friends or the community. In short, his decision making has no railings. He only takes his decisions and acts. After acting, He is ready to start a new adventure and take a similar action. From a psychoanalytical point of view it can be said that KacouAnanzè gives free way to the thoughts and desires contained in his preconscious without any censorship of his conscious<sup>13</sup>. As a result, he clashes with family, friends, the community and sometimes with himself. But it cannot be said that he is not intelligent. He has only developed the negative aspect of his intelligence. In sum, his intelligence is based on his ego.

Every human being is born with an ego which develops through its contact with the environment and its exposure to socialization process. It is defined as “*Our sense of our own value and importance*” in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*.<sup>14</sup> But when the value and the importance you give yourself are excessive to the detriment of other people’s interests, your ego becomes a flaw. In his book *Le traité de psychologie du soufisme*<sup>15</sup>, JavadNourbarkhsh gives it the term « nafs » a persan concept, meaning ego and finds that it is the source of blamable actions. For him, the nafs has two aspects: the aspect of transgression and the one of bad disposition characterized by pride, jealous, misery, mischief and all that is reprehensible by reason or common sense.

In his comparison of the ego to the intellect, he puts:

La tendance du nafsest d’imposer ses désirs incontestablement  
dans le but de se mettre en valeur. L’intellect, par contre, sert à  
la fois à la maîtrise de soi et comme régulateur du nafs, lui

conseillant les actions positives à accomplir et les mauvaises choses à éviter.<sup>16</sup>

This statement shows that the desires of the ego are naturally selfish whereas the intellect serves as a guide which leads the ego to acceptable directions of conduct. Our deeds and the satisfaction of our desires must not be detrimental to the social norms once they are manifested to the society. In other terms, the role of the intellect is to curb our instinctive and selfish actions. KacouAnanzé's flaws derive from his egoistic behaviours. He is selfish, boastful and arrogant, greedy. He deceives and cheats. He is miser and possessive and wicked. All these features of his character appear as long as the tales show him in relation with the other legendary characters.

He wants everything good to belong to him even if he does not deserve it. If he loses it, he becomes angry with the winner. If he does not have anything to gain from a companion, he puts an end to the companionship. He parts from Iguana son at the funeral of the latter's mother, when the villagers stop serving him the meals and start feeding Papa Stay-Put instead in the tale "Mother Iguana's funeral".

He boasts of his own beauty by telling the story about how his beauty was a point of focus in the village before he becomes hunchbacked in "The Spider Hump":

I was a handsome devil. Nowhere could you find a creature so  
handsome, so charming as I. Women were dazzled and ran spellbound at my heels(...)  
Many were the women who walked the distance of a moon, two moons,  
even twenty moons, just to see me. And when they see me, they could  
forget to leave.<sup>17</sup>

He boasts of his own physical strength in "Spider and Tortoise", calling himself : *awrestling champion*.<sup>18</sup> An arrogant person rarely admits the arrogance of a challenger. If KacouAnanzé had not answered to the challenge of Tortoise, he would not have lost the world of happiness offered to him by the grateful Squirrel. He is so proud that he did not think that a tortoise could defeat him in a fight.

He is greedy. His greediness has no limit. That is why the narrator often expresses it in an hyperbolic way. Whenever he has the opportunity, he eats to his fill as in Mother Iguana's village. He almost finishes eating a cow with Hyena, another greedy character like him in "The Sacred Cow".<sup>19</sup> He likes to be where there is plenty of food as in the Squirrel's village full of vast plantations of tubers, vegetables and fruits. He does not share food with anyone. He shares the cow with Hyena only with the purpose of using his stupidity. After their meal, Hyena was the only one to be beaten because he waited inside the cow until he found and eat the cow's heart which KacouAnanzé forbade him to eat, while Ananzé was already outside. Otherwise he does not share his food.

He is a miser. While eating the cow with Hyena, he declared that no ant and no fly should touch the meat. His misery borders on wickedness. In Iguana's son's village, he took his time to eat alone the meals he did not deserve without

paying attention to the bereaved Iguana Son who was getting thinner for lack of food. His ego makes him miser and too possessive. But if someone is in possession of something that he does not have, he becomes jealous. In “The Pig’s Snout”<sup>20</sup>, at the slightest opportunity, he cut off and ate the beautiful trunk of the porc who in the place of the trunk sprouted a snout that he carries till today.

If all the flaws of KacouAnanzè derive from his egoistic behaviours, it means that the ego is a source of blamable actions. His shrewdness and tricks rarely make him succeed in his quests really. On the contrary, they make him fail very often. For, even if he is sometimes successful, he succeeds by cheating and tricks, in other words, he does not reach his goals very often. Karen C. Hatch, in her preface to the translation of *The Black Cloth* made a similar remark: “*Sometimes, he comes out the victor, at other times, however, he finds himself caught in his own web*”.<sup>21</sup>

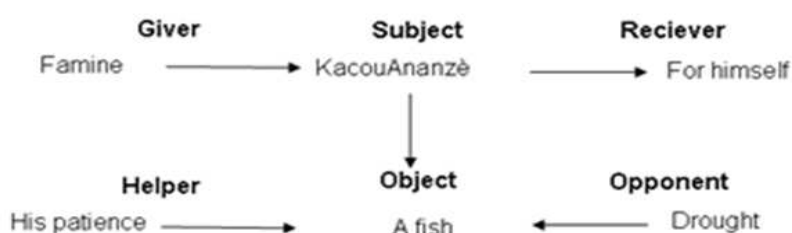
### KACOU ANANZE TRAPPED IN HIS OWN WEB: A STRUCTURAL REPRESENTATION

Six out of nine folktales of *The Black Cloth* in which KacouAnanzè appears, show him as a victim of his own ego. His ego has put him a veil which prevents him from considering the value of the other characters and what they suffer. He only thinks of how he can overcome the other characters in any situation but he is often surprised by his failure. The following actantial diagrammes show how he moves from success to failure in a recurrent way. The purpose of the actantial model is to determine the position of each acting force in relation to the central project in a narrative. The diagrammes allow the reader to visualize the physical or abstract forces in action. These acting forces take part in the achievement of the project according to “*three pairs of six functions: subject/object, giver/receiver, helper/opponent*”<sup>22</sup>

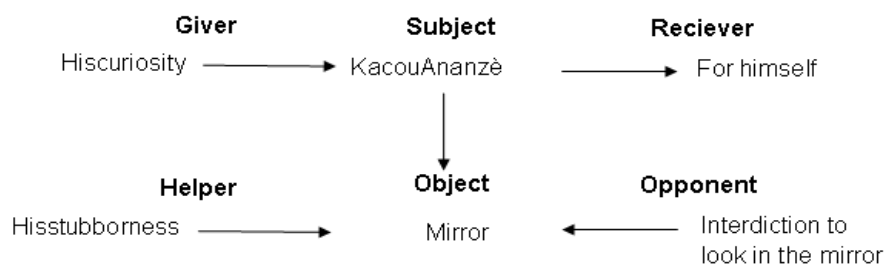
In this article, each folktale is represented by two diagrammes. In the first, he succeeds. In the second, he fails, as result of his own ego.

#### The Acting Forces and their Roles in “The Mirror of Dearth”:

##### Diagramme 1: Success



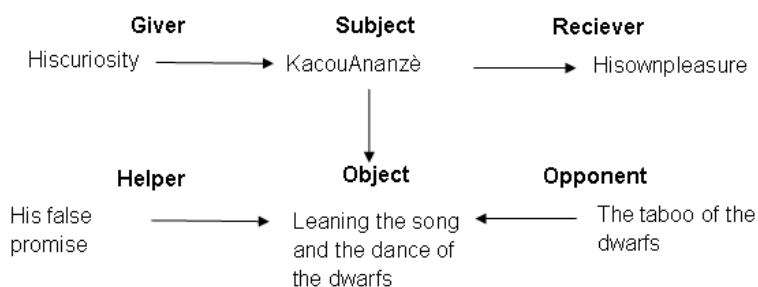
##### Diagramme 2: Failure



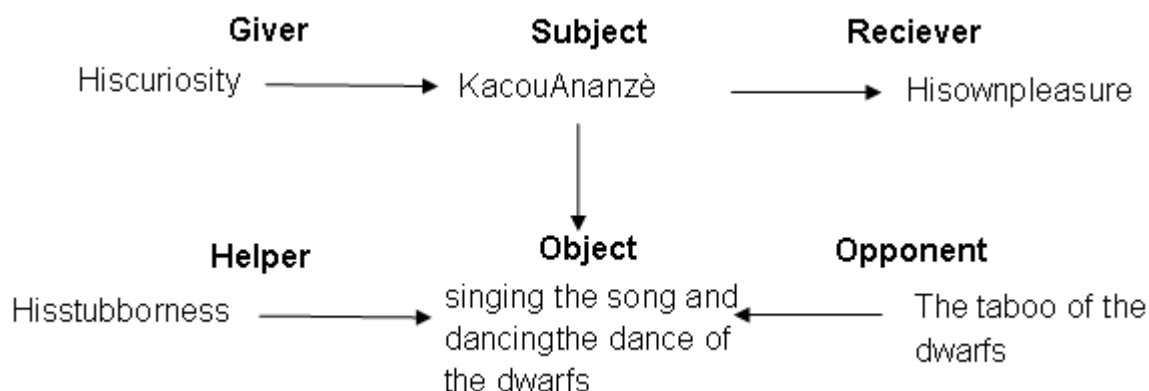
In diagramme 1, KacouAnanzè succeeds in catching a small fish in the river in the dry season when there is a great famine. Like everybody in the village, he is in a situation between life and death. In diagramme 2, he falls back into his situation of hunger because he looks in the mirror against the will of the queen of the kingdom of wealth in which he finds himself. As in the first diagramme, the receiver of his quest is himself.

### The Acting Forces and Their Roles in “Spider’s Hump”

#### Diagramme 1: Success



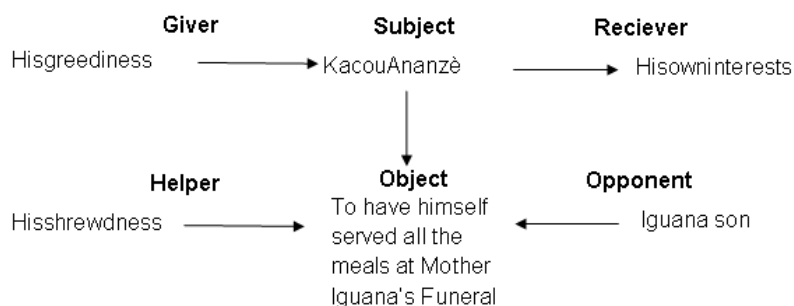
#### Diagramme 2: Failure

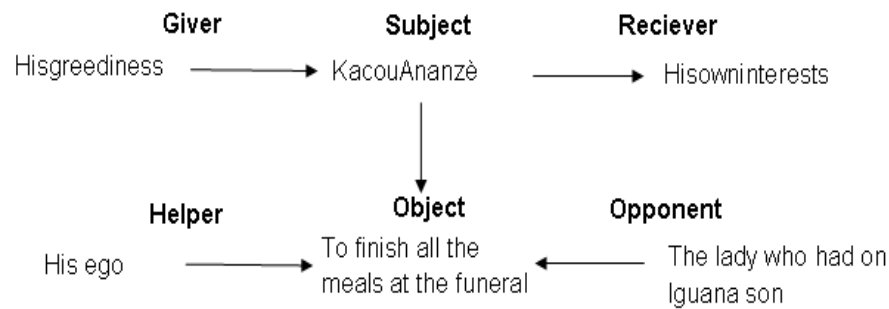


In diagramme 1, KacouAnanzè succeeds in learning the song and the dance of the dwarfs in spite of his promise to obey their law. In the second diagramme, he becomes hunchbacked for having sung the song and danced the dance of the dwarfs. In the two diagrammes, the receiver is KacouAnanzè. He enjoyed the song and the dance of the dwarfs against their will.

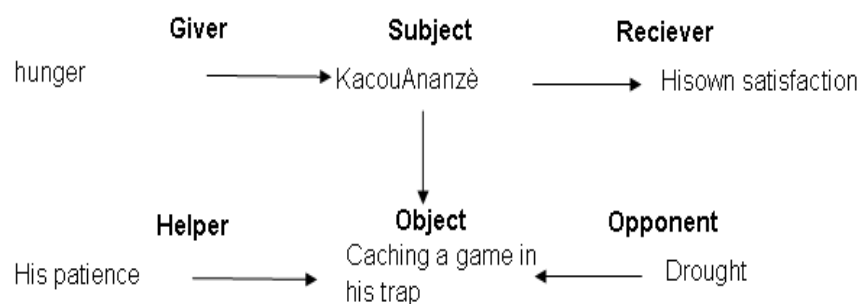
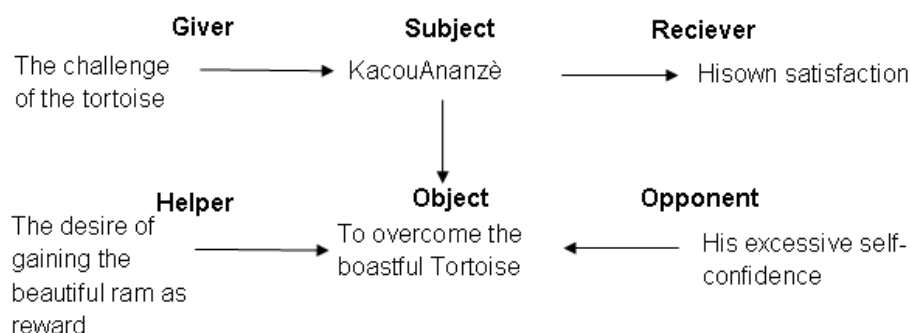
### The acting forces and their roles in “Mother Iguana’s Funeral”

#### Diagramme 1: Success



**Diagramme 2: Failure**

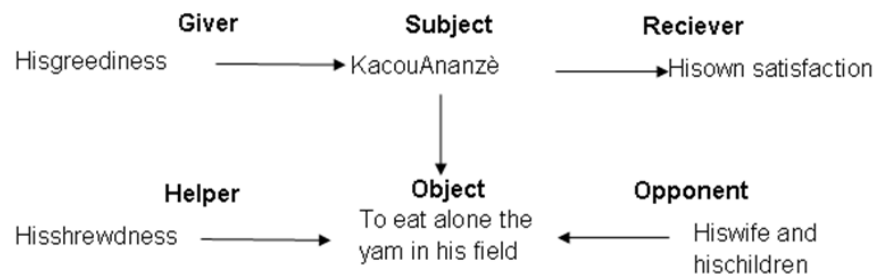
In diagramme 1, KacouAnanzè succeeds in having himself served all the meals at the funeral of Mother Iguana after the change of their names. In diagramme 2, he fails. His tricks of eating alone all the meals did not work to the end because a lady who had pity on Iguana son decides to serve him the meals instead. The receiver of the quest in the two diagrammes is KacouAnanzè who always thinks of his own interests.

**The acting forces and their roles in “Spider and the Tortoise”****Diagramme 1: Success****Diagramme 2: Failure**

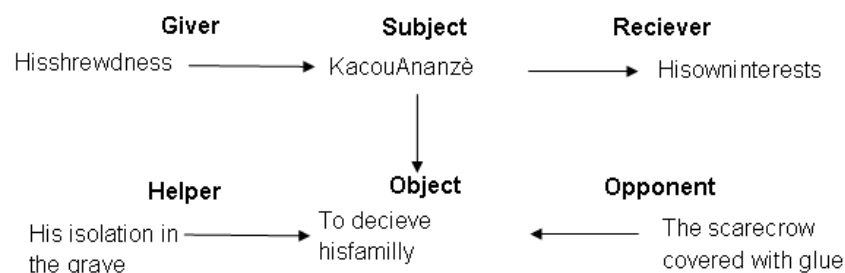
In diagramme 1, thanks to his patience, KacouAnanzè succeeds in catching a squirrel in the dry season. He yields to the begging of the squirrel by saving his life against a promise of a marvelous world of plenty. In diagramme 2, instead of staying in that world of abundance and happiness, he replies to the challenge of a boastful tortoise who eventually defeats him. The receiver in the two diagrammes is KacouAnanzè. His ego does not accept the boast of any other animal.

### The Acting Forces and Their Roles in “The Yam Field”

#### Diagramme 1: Success



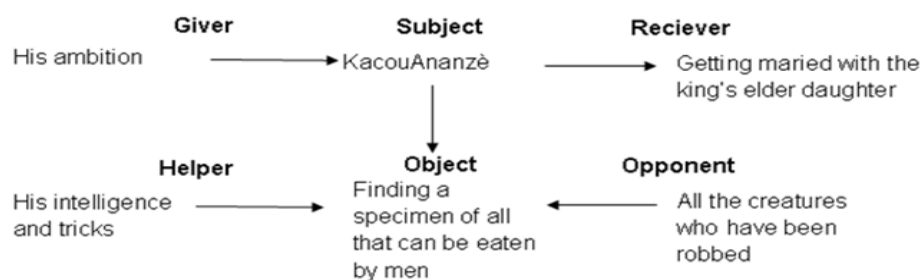
#### Diagramme 2: Failure



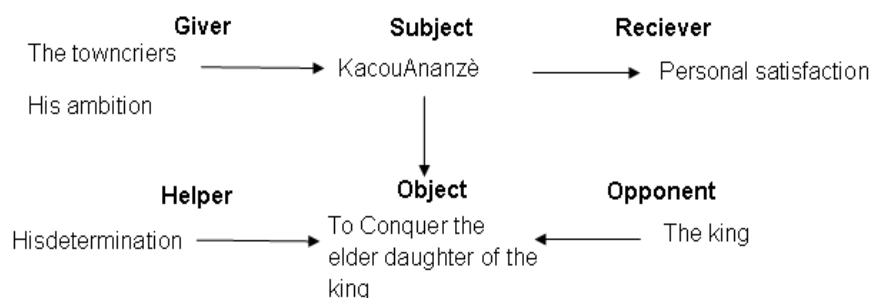
In diagramme 1, thanks to his tricks, KacouAnanzè succeeds in eating the yams in his field without his wife and his children. In diagramme 2, his tricks did not last because of the scarecrow covered with glue which retains him stuck until dawn. The receiver in the two diagrammes is KacouAnanzè. He deceives his own family because, by all means, he wants to reach his goal of being alone to eat the yams.

### The Acting Forces and Their Roles in “The Dowry”

#### Diagramme 1: Success



#### Diagramme 2: Failure



In diagramme 1, KacouAnanzè succeeds in fulfilling the requirement of the king who wants to give his elder daughter in marriage. The requirement consists in finding a specimen of all that can be eaten by human beings. In diagramme 2, He fails in gaining the hand of the king's elder daughter. The receiver in both cases is his personal satisfaction because he wants to show to the king that he is the only one capable of taking up his challenge and marry his elder daughter. But the king disapproves of his dishonest tricks of collecting the specimens.

The actantial diagrammes representing the six folktales show that KacouAnanzè is caught in a cycle of success and failure brought about by his egoistic behaviours. Apart from his negative moral features, KacouAnanzè displays a compromising curiosity which leads him to trouble. He always wants to do what is forbidden. It is not bad to be curious. All depends on the subject of one's curiosity. In "The Mirror of Dearth", "Spider's Hump" and "Spider and the Tortoise", curiosity plays the role of 'giver' that is an acting force which urges him to act for a quest. In "Spider and his son"<sup>23</sup> in which he is not the main character, he spoils the happy life of his son with his curiosity by killing the mysterious boa which is the wealth provider of the son, because he is very curious to know the origin of the son's wealth. His curiosity has always been a step-stone to a previous situation of wealth and happiness. It is a hyphen between his success and his failure. His excessive curiosity is part of his ego, since he uses it to prove his superiority to others.

## CONCLUSIONS

KacouAnanzè is a type of a category of persons in the society. His picture is the one of those persons who have many flaws but present a false appearance. One cannot make the difference between a bad and a good person because we cannot judge from appearance. Symbolically, all the spiders look alike, with their eight legs, and their art of web weaving. The world of folktales is a representation of human life. Folktale is a literary genre in which exists a mythical clever character used by the story-teller to teach good moral and social values. In that respect, Robert Pelton puts: "*The trickster appears in the myth and folktales of nearly every traditional society*"<sup>24</sup>. The trickster symbolizes human beings with their flaws and their qualities. Particularly, he stands for those persons who have more flaws than qualities and for whom qualities are accidental because they use their qualities to reach their egoistic goals.

The actantial diagrammes show that Kacou does not enjoy the goals he reaches in the second episode of the tales. In the first, he succeeds but in the second he fails. Every tale represented in the diagrammes contains an internal dynamic of cyclic type. Jean Gauvin defines the cyclic type as follows: "*Selon le type cyclique, deux récits se succèdent, l'un monte et l'autre descend (or inversement). La situation initiale ressemble à la situation initiale, sans se confondre avec elle à cause des épisodes intermédiaires.*"<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary. New York: William Collins and World Publishing Co. 2002 p.541.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Dadié. *The Black Cloth* (Translated from French by Karen C. Hatch). Massachusetts: the University of Massachusetts Press. 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Karen C. Hatch. « Translator's preface » to Bernard Dadié's *The Black Cloth*. Op. cit., p. XVI. <sup>1</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary. Op. cit., p. 732

<sup>4</sup> Karen C. Hatch. Bernard Dadié's *The Black Cloth* .op. cit., p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> *The Black Cloth*. pp. 3-11

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.28-36

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.28-36<sup>1</sup> Jean Gauvin. *Comprendre les contes*. Paris : Editions Saint Paul. 19980.p.9.

<sup>8</sup> *The Black Cloth*. pp. 3-4

<sup>9</sup> *Ibi.*, pp.,62-70

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.104-114

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.104-114

<sup>12</sup> Mary Bronson Merki. *Teen Health*. New York : Glencoe, Mc Graw-Hill.1996.p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.psychologies.com/Therapies/Toutes-les-therapies/Therapeutes/Articles-et-Dossiers/Sigmund-Freud-le-pere-de-la-psychanalyse/4>

<sup>14</sup> *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 6th edition. Oxford :O.U.P. .2002.p.403.

<sup>15</sup> JavadNourbakhsh. *Le traité de psychologie du soufisme*. Londres :Les éditions des publicationsKhaniqahiNimatullahi. 2007. p. 23.The tendency of the nafs is to impose its desires surely with a view to value itself.The intellect,on the contrary serves as a guide and regulator of the nafs, by advising him positive actions to accomplish and bad things to avoid. (My translation)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*,p.21.

<sup>17</sup> *The Black Cloth* . "The Spider Hump" in. p.2

<sup>18</sup> *The Black Cloth*. "Spider and Tortoise" . p.58

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* "The Sacred Cow".p.91.

<sup>20</sup> *The Black Cloth*."The Pig's Snout". P.71

<sup>21</sup> *The Black Cloth*.p.xxii.

<sup>22</sup> A.J. Greimas. (*Sémantique structurale*) in Patrice Pavis. *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*. Paris : Editions sociales. 1980. P. 20.

<sup>23</sup> "Spider and his son" in *The Black Cloth*.p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Robert D. Pelton. *The Trickster in West Africa*.[www.amazon.com/the-trickster-west-Africa-Hermeneutics/dp/0520067916](http://www.amazon.com/the-trickster-west-Africa-Hermeneutics/dp/0520067916)

<sup>25</sup> Jean Gauvin. *Comprendre les contes* op.cit. , p. 13. ( According to the cyclic type, there are two successive narratives, one rises and the other falls (or inversely) ; the final situation looks like the initial situation, without being confused with it, because of intermediary episodes). My translation.

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